

Improved Prayer  
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In a recent Bible study, a group of ten Christians did what many humans do at the end of the year: they reflected, they made goals, and they planned. They worked individually, and then they came together to share their thoughts. In looking back at 2025, they were tasked with summarizing it in a single word, and many arrived at “blessed,” “challenging,” or something similar. As they moved into making goals for 2026, an unsurprising thread appeared. As one person said, “I want to get better at prayer”, several soft “amens” floated around the room, and ultimately, half of the participants revealed that this was their goal too.

The ten who gathered in 2025 will take some comfort knowing that they are not alone in wanting to “get better at prayer.” In fact, God’s children have been yearning for better prayer lives for at least the last 2,000 years, and certainly beyond.

**Luke 11** starts, *“It happened that while Jesus was praying in a certain place, after He had finished, one of His disciples said to Him, ‘Lord, teach us to pray just as John also taught his disciples.’”*

That simple request, *“Lord, teach us to pray,”* reveals that prayer is not just a raw instinct. It is something we can learn, and thus, something we can practice.

Prayer is meant to be a refuge - a grace-filled gift and an invitation to approach the Creator. In prayer, we praise Him, confess our sins, express gratitude, pour out our hearts, and even (what by all rights should be audacious) bring our requests before Him. Furthermore, He supplies the means by which this is all accomplished! We pray through the mediation of HIS Son, given to us as a perfect high priest. We pray with help from HIS Spirit, who actively works to interpret the groanings of our hearts that words can’t yet describe. There is no downside to this arrangement. Mathematically speaking, the formula is perfect, yet humans still fail to work it.

**Luke 18:9-14** tells a story of two men,

*one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.’ But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, the sinner!’*

Even our human eyes can see what’s going on here. The Pharisee is strutting into the courts of God, offering a sacrifice of arrogance, pride, and conceit. If prayers have an aroma, this one stinks! (Perhaps this one has more of a stench?) We don’t want to hear this prayer, and God surely wouldn’t either. Jesus confirms our analysis, “I tell you, this tax collector went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

His conclusion tells us what we could have already surmised: The Pharisee’s prayer wasn’t good, and the tax collector’s was. But there’s a little more to it than that, isn’t there? Jesus gives us the word that wraps it up perfectly: Justification. One man left justified before God.

Justification is one of those big, beautiful Bible words that sometimes makes us stumble in our understanding. Let's try to put it simply here and really understand Jesus's parable. To be justified is to be made right, and we are justified with God when our relationship with God, which was previously broken, is made right again. Jesus teaches that our prayers - the heart we present to God - have something to do with us being "right" before God. Perhaps we could paraphrase the end of Jesus's parable by saying it this way: The tax collector went home having a strong relationship with God, and the Pharisee went home with the delusion that he did. What David observes in **Psalm 51** is what we see played out here: *"The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; A broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise."*

If we truly want to "get better at prayer," then it would seem a wise first step is not by simply refining our words or speaking more of them, but examining our hearts. Scripture consistently points us there. **Proverbs 4:23** instructs us, *"Watch over your heart with all diligence, For from it flow the springs of life."* The implication is clear: what flows out of us in prayer is inseparably tied to what is springing up within us.

When pride takes root in the heart, prayer becomes performance. When bitterness is harbored, prayer becomes accusation. When anger is left unattended, the springs are poisoned. And does God want to be served water drawn from poisoned springs? Too often, the problem is not that we pray too little, nor even that we don't have the right words at our disposal, but that we pray from hearts unwilling to be humbled.

The tax collector went home justified not because he had mastered the discipline of prayer, but because he came empty, honest, and dependent. The Pharisee, for all his religious fluency, left unchanged. Jesus' warning is gentle but unmistakable: God is not impressed by polished prayers offered from hardened hearts. He is drawn to humility, repentance, and truth.

So perhaps "getting better at prayer" begins there, not with more words, longer prayers, or greater confidence, but with a heart laid bare before God. When the heart is right, prayer will naturally follow. And when the springs are clean, the water offered to God will be pleasing to Him.